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ABSTRACT

A study involving 1,146 families with children between 3 and 17 years old was conducted to assess the extent and cause of violence and aggression on children by their parents. Research regarding incidence, modes, and patterns of child abuse was reviewed and problems with various methods of data collection were examined. A household interview technique was used, and violence was operationalized using the Conflict Resolution Technique scale. Data was analyzed in terms of type of violence, sex of parent, sex of child, and age of child. Among findings were that mothers are the most likely users of violence while sons and younger children are the more common victims. (SBH)

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VIOLENCE TOWARDS CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES*

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VIOLENCE TOWARDS CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES*

Last year at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science we proposed that, aside from war and riots, physical aggression occurs between family members more often that it occurs between any other individuals. Our evidence was drawn from numerous sources, including official statistics on murder, assault, and child abuse; national surveys of attitudes towards violence and violent behavior; and small pilot studies. Using this evidence as a basis, we claimed that violence between family members may be at least as common as love (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1976).

In the same presentation we noted that these claims were arrived at by piecing together evidence, since no studies had been conducted on violence between family members which used representative samples and which employed measurement techniques which would reduce the major problems of bias inherent in studying a sensitive issue such as violence in the family (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1976; Gelles, 1976).

Since that presentation, we have completed a study which examined violence between husbands and wives, parents and children, and siblings in a representative sample of American households.[1] This paper reports on the incidence, modes, and patterns of parent to child violence in the United States.

VIOLENCE TOWARDS CHILDREN: AN OVERVIEW

Despite the considerable attention which has been focused on the issue of child abuse and neglect, and the significant and lengthy discussions concerning the physical punishment of children, valid and reliable data on the incidence and/or prevelance of the use of violence and aggression on children by their parents are almost non-existent. And even the statistics which are available on child abuse and physical punishment do not report on the wide range of violent acts which are neither routine physical punishment nor abusive. The wide range of acts between spankings and grievious assault have largely gone unnoticed and unresearched by social scientists.

The data which are available are often flawed by conceptual, definitional, sampling, and measurement problems. Moreover, the available statistics are usually general estimates of incidence which do not give even the crudest breakdown by age or sex of the child or demographic characteristics of the parents. Nevertheless, the figures on violence and aggression between parents and children do shed <u>some</u> light on the scope of the phenomenon.

Physical Punishment

Perhaps the best and most complete research on the use of physical force in the family are the studies of physical punishment by parents. Various investigations indicate that between 84 and 97 percent of all parents use physical punishment at some point in the child's life (Blumberg, 1964-1965; Erlanger, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Stark and McEvov, 1970). Nevertheless, even these statistics fall short, in that they can not be used to

derive age specific rates; they are incomparable since some studies focus on the approval of using punishment rather than actual behavior; and others are based on non-representative clinical samples or specialized populations. Thus, while we can conclude that the physical punishment of children is extremely common, we have no estimate of the yearly incidence nor the age specific rates of this phenomenon. In addition, studies which focus on physical punishment allow little insight into the exact nature of behavior--in other words, what specific acts take place?

Child Abuse

An extensive variety of techniques have been employed to generate a wide range of estimates of the incidence of child abuse in the United States. Researchers have utilized official statistics, official clearinghouse data, household interviews, interviews of neighbors and informants, interviews with professionals in community agencies, and statistical projections to produce estimates of abuse which range from thousands of children abused per year to millions.

Official Statistics. During the late 1960's all fifty states enacted legislation which mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect cases. This legislation led to the establishment of some state clearinghouses which gathered official reports of child abuse and neglect. A survey of the official statistics on confirmed cases of physical child abuse which was conducted by Gil in 1968 yielded a figure of 6,000 abused children (Gil, 1970). The Children's Division of the American Humane (Association) operated a Clearinghouse for child abuse and neglect reports

beginning in 1974. Based on data supplied by 29 states, the Clearinghouse documented 35,642 cases of reported child abuse in 1974 (from "Highlights of 1974 National Data"-National Clearinghouse on Child Neglect and Abuse/ American Humane Association).

It is obvious that the data derived from official statistics are not ammenable to estimating a national incidence of physical child abuse. First, official data, such as those provided by the American Humane (Association), do not draw from all states and localities. In 1974 only 29 states supplied information to the National Clearinghouse on Child Neglect and Abuse. Secondly, the Clearinghouse data does not use a uniform definition of abuse; rather, each state and locality constructs and uses their own definitions based on state law and professional "rules of thumb". Thirdly, cases recorded by official agencies represent reported cases only, as such, can be treated as the tip of the child abuse iceberg, not the entire incidence picture.

Thus, the extent of child abuse and physical violence indicated by official statistics is inadequate and often uninterpretable due to varying definitions and rules of recording cases.

Household Surveys. Standing in contrast to official statistics are the data on physical violence and abuse derived from household surveys. Gil surveyed public attitudes, knowledge, and opinions of child abuse in conjunction with the National Opinion Research Corporation in 1965. Of a nationally representative sample of 1520 individuals surveyed, 45, or 3% of the sample, reported knowledge of 48 different incidents of

child abuse. Extrapolating to a national population of 110 million, Gil estimated that there were between 2.53 and 4.07 million adults throughout the United States who knew families involved in incidents of child abuse in the previous year, or between 13.3 to 21.4 incidents per 1,000 persons (Gil, 1970: 60). Light, by applying corrective adjustments to Gil's data and considering possible overlap of public knowledge of incidents, estimates that Gil's data indicate approximately 500,000 abused children in the United States during the survey year (1974).

Survey of Community Agencies. As indicated earlier, a major drawback in trying to interpret official statistics on child abuse is that the official records contain only reported cases. There may be numerous cases which come to the attention of doctors, social workers, and school teachers which are never reported to official agencies and which never get forwarded for inclusion in clearinghouse data and official statistics. Nagi attempted to compensate for the shortcomings of official statistics by surveying a national sample of community agencies and agency personnel (Nagi, 1975). Nagi drew a probability sample of housing units and then listed social and community agencies which provided services for those homes. These agencies were then surveyed. However, the final estimate of child abuse which was arrived at was based on an extrapolation from reporting rates which would be expected on a national basis using the presumed "full reporting rates" found in Florida. Nagi's estimate of child abuse is that 167,500 cases are reported annually while an additional 91,000 cases are not reported (Nagi, 1975: 16).

Statistical Projection. The last technique of estimating national incidence figures for physical abuse are statistical projections from at-hand clinical cases, hospital cases, local or regional reporting statistics, or estimates generated from a sample of state reporting data. The range of these statistics is quite wide--DeFrancis estimates that between 30,000 to 40,000 instances of "truly battered children" occur each year (Hearings of the Subcommittee on Children and Youth, of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, on S.1191, Child Abuse Prevention Act, 1973, p.293). Fontana proposes that there may be as many as 1.5 million cases of child abuse each year (1973), while Kempe sets the figure at close to 60,000 cases (1971). Cohen and Sussman (1975) use data on reported child abuse from the 10 most populous states and project 41,104 confirmed cases of child abuse for 1973. They go on, however, to conclude that:

> "the only conclusion which can be made fairly is that information indicating the incidence of child abuse in the United States simply does not exist."(Cohen and Sussman, 1975: 14)

Summary. It is evident that the conclusion made by Cohen and Sussman is the most accurate evaluation of the available data on the incidence of child abuse. Most of the projections can be regarded as simple "educated guesses". The information gleaned from official statistics must be qualified by the fact that they represent only "caught" cases of abuse which become cases through varied reporting and confirmation procedures (Gelles, 1975). In addition, information on "child abuse" is difficult to interpret because the term "child abuse" is as much a political concept, designed

to draw attention to a social problem, as it is a scientific concept which can be used to measure a specific phenomenon. In other words, child abuse can be broadly and loosely defined in order to magnify concern about this social problem. While some social scientists use the term to cover a wide spectrum of phenomenon which hinder the proper development of a child's potential (see for example: Gil, 1975), others use the term to focus attention on the specific case of severely physically injured children (see for example: Kempe et. al., 1962, and the discussion of the "battered baby syndrome").

The lack of valid and reliable data on the incidence of child abuse in the United States led to the inclusion of a clause in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (PL-93-237) calling for a full and complete study on the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Such a study has already been contracted by the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect. As an indication of the major problems which arise when one tries to measure the abuse and neglect of children, the contracted study has moved into the second quarter of its two year existence and no decisions have been made on appropriate definitions of abuse or what research design should be employed in the study.

A Note on Trend Data. It should be pointed out that the problems involved in estimating the incidence of child abuse make the task of interpreting trend data almost hopeless. First, it is impossible to determine if rates of reported abuse are rising due to an actual increase in the true rate of abuse or due to increased sensitivity on the part of professionals who see children and families. Secondly, the constant

change in the definition of abuse and the constant revisions of state child abuse and neglect laws, tend to broaden the definition of child abuse. This means that more families and children are vulnerable to being identified as abusers and abused.

Deaths of Children Caused by Violence and Abuse

The definitional and methodological problems inherent in studying the incidence of child abuse make it understandable why no reliable statistics exist. One would not, however, expect to find the same problem in determining how many children die each year as a consequence of parental violence or abuse. The fact that a death mandates official attention, in that a body must be attended to and reports must be filled out, should make it relatively easy to fix the mortality rate of children killed by their caretakers. Such is not the case. The statistics on how many children die as a result of caretaker inflicted abuse or violence are almost as variable as estimates of the incidence of child abuse. Fontana provides a conservative estimate of 700 children killed each year by their parents or guardians (1973). Helfer, testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth, projected 5,000 deaths a year over the next 10 years if steps are not taken to correct the situation (Hearings before the Subcommittee on Children and Youth, 1973: 254). PEDIATRIC NEWS reported that one child dies each day from child abuse--thus producing a yearly incidence of 365 (1975). Gil cited data from the U.S. Public Health Service which reported 686 children under age 15 died from homicide in 1967 (1970).

It is evident that there are not yet standard procedures of investigating the deaths of children nor are there standard procedures for recording such deaths as consequences of violence or abuse. Thus, the extent of the most serious facet of physical violence towards children is unknown.

The Need for a Study of Parental Violence

It was after evaluating the available evidence on the extent of force and violence between parents and children that we embarked on a national study of parental and family violence. While physical punishment of children appeared to be almost a universal aspect of parent-child relations, and while child abuse seemed to be a major social problem, we know very little about the modes and patterns of violence towards children in our society. We know almost nothing about the kinds of force and violence children experience. Are mothers more likely to hit their children then fathers? Who employs the most serious forms of violence? Which age group is most vulneralbe to being spanked, slapped, hit with a fist, or "beat up" by their parents? Although answers to these questions will not completely fill in the gaps in our knowledge about child abuse, we see the information we generate in this study as providing an important insight into the extent of force and violence children experience and how many children there are who are vulneralbe to injury from serious violence.

METHODS[2]

One of the most difficult techniques of studying the extent of

parental violence is to employ a household interview which involves the self-reporting of violent acts. Although this technique is difficult and creates the problem of underreporting, we felt that because of the shortcomings of previous research on child abuse (Gelles, 1976), this was the only viable research design which we could employ to assess the extent and causes of intra-family violence.

Sample and Procedures

The Response Analysis[3] national probability sample was used for this study. A national sample of 103 primary areas (counties, or groups of counties) stratified by geographic region, type of community, and other population characteristics was generated. Within these primary areas, 300 interviewing locations (census districts or block groups) were selected. Each location was divided into 10 to 25 housing units by the trained interviewers. Sample segments from each interviewing location were selected and the last step involved randomly selecting an eligible person to be interviewed in each designated household.

Eligible families consisted of a couple who identified themselves as married or being a "couple" (Man and woman living together in a conjugal unit). A random procedure was used so that the sample would be approximately half male and half female.

The final national probability sample produced 2,143 completed interviews.[4] Interviews were conducted with 960 men and 1,183 women. In each family where there was at least one child living at home between the ages of 3 and 17, a "referent child" was selected using a random

procedure. Of the 2,143 families interviewed, 1,146 had children between the ages of 3 and 17 living at home. Our data on parent to child violence are based on the analysis of these 1,146 parent-child relationships.

The interviews were conducted between January and April, 1976. The interview protocol was designed to take approximately 60 minutes to complete. The questions on parent to child violence were one part of an extensive protocol designed to measure the extent of family violence and the factors associated with violence between family members.

The final sample of 2,143 families appears to be extremely representative in terms of major demographic attributes of American families.

Violence: Defined and Operationalized

For the purposes of this study, violence is nominally defined as "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived intention of, physically injuring another person". The "physical hurt" can range from slight pain, as in a slap, to murder. The basis for the "intent to hurt" may range from a concern for a child's safety (as when a child is spanked for going into the street) to hostility so intense that the death of the other is desired (Gelles and Straus, 1977).

We have chosen to label our dependent variable "violence" for a number of reasons--some scientific and others political. From a scientific point of view, a number of possible concepts could apply to the phenomenon we are studying. We could have chosen to examine "aggression"; however, aggression is a more general concept than violence and involves any malevolent act which brings about psychological injury, material

deprivation, physical pain, or physical damage. A possible alternative would have been to define our phenomenon as "physical aggression ". A second consideration is that many of the acts we will call "violent" are considered acceptable forms of corporal punishment. Thus, we could have opted for the term "force" which does not have the deviant connotation attached to it as does "violence". Using the term "force" however, would tend to minimize the impact and possible harm of the behavior we are studying. Quite simply, we want to draw attention to the issue of people hitting one another in families, and we have chosen to define this behavior as "violent" in order to raise controversy and call the behavior into question. In addition, our previous research (Gelles,1974) indicated that almost all acts, from spankings to murder, could somehow be justified and neutralized by someone as being in the best interests of the victim. Indeed, one thing which influenced our final choice of a concept was the fact that acts parents carry out on their children in the name of corporal punishment or acceptable force, could, if they were done to strangers or adults, be considered chargable assault.

Violence was operationalized in the national study of family violence through the use of a scale titled the "Conflict Resolution Technique-(CRT)". This technique was first developed at the University of New Hampshire in 1971 and has been used and modified extensively over the next five years in numerous studies of family violence (see for example: Allen and Straus, 1975; Bulcroft and Straus, 1975; Straus, 1974). The Conflict Resolution Technique Scales were designed to measure intrafamily conflict in the sense of the means used to resolve conflicts of interest

(Straus, 1976, 1976:4). The Conflict Resolution Technique contains three groups of conflict resolution items: (1) the use of rational discussion and argument; (2) the use of verbal and non-verbal expressions of hostility--such as acts which symbolically hurt the other or threats to hurt the other; and, (3) the use of physical force or violence as a means of resolving the conflict. The final scale contains 18 items, 8 of which involve the use of force or violence.

Figure 1 About Here

The administration of the Conflict Resolution Technique involves presenting the subjects with the list of the 18 items and asking them to indicate what they (the subjects) did when they had a disagreement with the referent child in the past year and in the course of their relationship.

Reliability and Validity. The reliability and validity of the Conflict Resolution Technique has been assessed over the five year period of its development and modification. Pretests on more than 300 college students indicate that the indices have an adequate level of internal consistency reliability (Straus, 1976:11). Bulcroft and Straus (1975) provide evidence of concurrent validity. In addition, evidence of "construct validity" exists in that data compiled in the pretests of the scale are in accord with previous empirical findings and theories (Straus, 1976: 13).

57. Parents and children use many different ways of trying to settle differences between them. I'm going to read a list of some things that you and (CHILD) might have done when you had a dispute. Still using Card A, I would like you to tell me how often you did it with (CHILD) in the last year.

	Q. 57 RESPONDENT								Q. 58 EVER HAPPENED			Q. 59 CHILD								
	NEVER	ONCE	TWICE	3-5 TIMES	6-10 TIMES	11-20 TIMES	MORE THAN 20 TIMES	DON'T KNOW	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	NEVER	ONCE	TWICE	3-5 TIMES	6-10 TIMES	11-20 TIMES	MORE THAN 20 TIMES	DON'T KNOW	
a. Discussed the issue calmly	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	421-23
b. Got information to back up (your/ his or her) side of things	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	424-26
c. Brought in or tried to bring in someone to help settle things	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	427-29
d. Insulted or swore at the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	430-32
e. Sulked and/or refused to talk about it	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	433-35
f. Stomped out of the room or house (or yard)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	436-38
g. Cried	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	439-41
h. Did or said something to spite the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	442-44
i. Threatened to hit or throw something at the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	445-47
j. Threw or smashed or hit or kicked something	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	448-50
k. Threw something at the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	451-53
l. Pushed, grabbed, or shoved the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	454-56
m. Slapped or spanked the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	457-59
n. Kicked, bit, or hit with a fist	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	460-62
o. Hit or tried to hit with something	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	463-65
p. Beat up the other one	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	466-68
q. Threatened with a knife or gun	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	469-71
r. Used a knife or gun	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	472-74
s. Other (PROBE):_____	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	1	2	X	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	X	475-77

FOR EACH ITEM CIRCLED AS "NEVER" OR "DON'T KNOW" ON Q. 57, ASK:

58. When you and (CHILD) have had a disagreement, have you ever (ITEM)?

ASK EVERYONE:

59. Now, let's talk about (CHILD). Tell me how often in the past year when you had a disagreement (he/she) (FIRST ITEM CIRCLED). (RECORD ABOVE)

TAKE BACK CARD A

FIGURE 1

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Violence Scale. An advantage of the violence scale, aside from previous evidence of its reliability, "concurrent" validity, and "construct" validity, is that the mode of administration increased the likelihood of the interviewer establishing rapport with the subject. The force and violence items came at the end of the list of conflict resolution items. Presumably, this enhanced the likelihood that the subject would become committed to the interview and continue answering questions. Our analysis of the responses to the items indicates that there was no noticable drop in the completion rate of items as the list moved from the rational scale questions to the most violent modes of conflict resolution.

Two disadvantages of the scale are: (1) it focuses on conflict situations and does not allow for the measurement of the use of violence in situations where there was no "conflict of interest". Secondly, the scale deals with the commission of acts only. We have no idea of what the consequences of those acts were. Thus, we have only a limited basis of projecting these statistics to the extent of the phenomenon "child abuse", since child abuse normally is thought to be an act which has some injurious consequences for a child. While we may learn that a parent used a gun or a knife, and we can presume that this has negative consequences for the child, even if he or she was not injured; we do not know what the actual consequences were.

RESULTS

As we proposed at the outset of this paper, "ordinary" physical punishment and "child abuse" are but two ends of a single continuum of violence towards children. In between are millions of parents whose use of physical force goes beyond mild punishment, but which, for various reasons does not get identified and labeled as child abuse.

Sixty-three percent of the respondents who had children between the ages of 3 and 17 living at home mentioned at least one violent episode during the survey year.[5] The proportion of our sample reporting at least one violent occurrence in the course of raising the child was 73 percent.

As expected, the milder forms of violence were more common. Slaps or spankings were mentioned by 58 percent of the respondents as having occurred in the previous year and by 71 percent of the parents as having ever taken place. Forty-one percent of the parents admitted pushing or shoving the referent child in 1975; while forty-six percent said pushes or shoves had ever occurred. Hitting with something was reported by

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Table 1 About Here

---

13 percent of the parents for the last year and by 20 percent for the duration of their raising the referent child. Throwing an object was less

TABLE 1

TYPES OF PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE

	OCCURRED IN PAST YEAR				PERCEN
	Once	Twice	More Than Twice	Total	OCCU
Threw Something (n=1142)	1.3%	1.8%	2.3%	5.4%	9
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved (n=1146)	4.3%	9.0%	27.2%	40.5%	46
Slapped or Spanked (n=1145)	5.2%	9.1%	43.6%	58.2%	71
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with Fist (n=1143)	.7%	.8%	1.7%	3.2%	7
Hit with Something (n=1145)	1.0%	2.6%	9.8%	13.4%	20
Beat Up (n=1140)	.4%	.3%	.6%	1.3%	4
Threatened with Knife or Gun (n=1144)	.1%	0%	0%	.1%	2
Used a Knife or Gun (n=1142)	.1%	0%	0%	.1%	2

common--approximately 5 percent of the parents did this in the survey year while more than 9 percent had ever thrown something at their referent child.

The more dangerous types of violence were the least frequent. However, extrapolating the data to the population of children 3 to 17 years of age living with both parents produces an astoundingly large number of children who were kicked, bit, punched ,beat up, threatened with a gun or a knife, or had a gun or a knife actually used on them. First, looking at the number of parents who reported each type of violence, approximately 3 percent of the parents reported kicking, biting, or hitting the referent child with a fist in 1975; while nearly 8 percent stated that these acts had occurred at some point in the raising of the child. Slightly more than 1 percent of the respondents reported "beating up" the randomly selected referent child in the last year and 4 percent stated that they had ever done this.[6] One-tenth of 1 percent, or one in a thousand parents admitted to threatening their child with a gun or a knife in 1975, while nearly 3 parents in 100 said they had ever threatened their child with such weapons. The same statistics were found for parents admitting actually using a gun or a knife--.1 percent for the year, almost 3 percent ever.[7]

One can extrapolate these frequencies to estimate how many children were victims of these serious modes of violence in 1975 and how many ever faced these types of violence.[8] There were nearly 46 million children between the ages of 3 and 17 years old who lived with both parents in 1975 (Bureau of the Census, 1975). Of these children between 3.1 and 4 million

have ever been kicked, bit, or punched; while between 1 and 1.9 million were kicked, bit, or punched in 1975. Between 1.4 and 2.3 million children have been "beat up" while growing up, and between 275,000 and 3/4 of a million 3 to 17 year olds were "beat up" in 1975. Lastly, our data means that between 900,000 and 1.8 million American children, between the ages of 3 and 17 have ever had their parents use a gun or a knife on them. Our figures do not allow for a reliable extrapolation of how many children faced parents using guns and knives in 1975, but our estimate would be something close to 46,000 children (based on an incidence of 1 in 1,000 children).

An examination of the data on violence used on children in 1975 indicates that violence typically is a phenomenon that is a pattern of parent-child relations rather than a one or two time event. Only in the case of using a gun or knife was the violent episode likely to be a one-time affair. While it is generally accepted that slaps, spankings, and shoves are frequently used techniques of child rearing, we find that even bites, kicks, punches, and using objects to hit children occur frequently in the families where they are employed.

Children at Risk

As we stated earlier, our examination of violent acts without information on the consequences of those acts prevents us from accurately estimating how many children incurred physical harm from violence during any one year. Our problem is compounded by the fact that we rely on the subject's

own definition of what is meant by "beating up" a child. In addition, we do not know what objects were used to hit the child (a pipe or a paddle?); and, we do not know how the guns or knives were deployed. Nevertheless, we felt it was important to generate an estimate of children-at-risk. We chose to compile an "at-risk" index which combined the items we felt produced the highest probability of injuring of damaging the child (kicked, bit, or hit with a fist; hit with something; beat up; threatened with a knife or a gun; used a knife or a gun). Using this index, we found that 3.6 percent of the parents admitted to using at least one of these modes of violence at least once in 1975. Assuming the acts we indexed have a high potential of causing harm to the intended victim, between 1.4 million to 1.9 million children were vulnerable to physical injury from violence in 1975.

A Note on the Incidence Data and Extrapolations

The data on the incidence of physical violence between parents and children and the extrapolations which produced estimates of the number of children who experienced violence and who are at risk of physical injury ought to be considered low estimates of violence towards children. These figures represent a low estimate of violence for a number of reasons. First, we are dealing with self-reports of violence. Although the subjects responding that they spanked or slapped their children may be a good estimate of how many people actually carried out these acts, we believe that the desire to give socially desired responses caused many people to underreport

the more serious modes of violence. If one subject in a thousand answered that they used a gun or knife, it might be reasonable to assume that at least another one in a thousand used these weapons and did not admit to it in the interview. Secondly, we interviewed only "intact" families where both adult males and females were in the household. Thus, our data are representative of two parent families. If, as some believe, parental violence is more common in single parent families, than our data underestimate the number of children experiencing potentially damaging acts from their parents. Lastly, our lower than expected response rate might mean that some high violent families may have refused to be interviewed. If this is the case (and we as yet do not know if it is), our incidence statistics might again be low estimates of violence towards children.

As a result of the sampling frame used and the methodological problems involved in using self-reports of violence, we see our statistics, although they may seem high to some, as being quite conservative and low estimates of the true level of violence towards children in the United States.

Violence Toward Children by Sex of Parent

Sixty-eight percent of the mothers and 58 percent of the fathers in our sample reported at least one violent act towards their child during the survey year. Seventy-six percent of the mothers and 71 percent of the fathers indicated at least one violent episode in the course of rearing their referent child. Our data on violence in the survey year indicate a small but significant difference between mothers and fathers using violence on their

children. It has been frequently argued that mothers are more prone to use violence because they spend more time with their children. We hypothesize that the explanation for mothers' greater likelihood of using violence goes beyond the simple justification that they spend more time with the children. Our future analyses of the information gathered in our survey of violence in the family will examine this relationship from a number of points of view, including family power, coping ability, resources, and personality traits.

TABLES 2 and 3 ABOUT HERE

Examining the relationship between sex of the parent and various modes of violence used on children in the survey year and during the duration of the parent-child relationship, we find that for both the survey year and the duration of the relationship, mothers are more likely to throw something at the child, slap or spank the child, or hit the child with something. There are no significant differences between mothers and fathers for any of the other forms of violence. It is interesting to note that even for the most serious forms of violence, such as beating up; kicking, biting, or punching; or, using guns or knives, men and women are approximately equal in their disposition to use these modes of violence on their children. This is important because this is one of the only situations where women

TABLE 2

PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE IN PREVIOUS YEAR BY SEX OF PARENT

	PERCENT USED MODE OF VIOLENCE				
	Father		Mother		
Threw Something	3.6%	(521)	6.8%	(621)	*
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved	29.8%	(523)	33.4%	(623)	
Slapped or Spanked	53.3%	(522)	62.5%	(621)	*
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with Fist	2.5%	(520)	4.0%	(623)	
Hit with Something	9.4%	(523)	16.7%	(622)	*
Beat Up	.6%	(521)	1.8%	(619)	
Threatened with Knife or Gun	.2%	(522)	0%	(622)	
Used a Knife or Gun	.2%	(520)	0%	(622)	

^{2}
* x $\leq$ .05

^{2}
** x $\leq$ .01

TABLE 3

PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE EVER BY SEX OF PARENT

	PERCENT EVER USED MODE OF VIOLENCE			
	Father		Mother	
Threw Something	7.5%	(521)	11.3%	(621)
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved	35.6%	(523)	39.5%	(623)
Slapped or Spanked	67.7%	(523)	73.6%	(622)
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with a Fist	6.7%	(520)	8.7%	(623)
Hit with Something	15.7%	(523)	23.6%	(622)
Beat Up	4.0%	(521)	4.2%	(619)
Threatened with Knife or Gun	3.1%	(522)	2.6%	(622)
Used a Knife or Gun	3.1%	(520)	2.7%	(622)

* $\chi^2 < .05$

** $\chi^2 < .01$

are as likely as men to be violent.

Violence Towards Children by Sex of the Child

While females are more likely to be the users of violence in parent-child relations, it is the male children who are the most frequent victims. Sixty-six percent of the sons and 60 percent of the daughters were struck at least once in the survey year ($x^2 \leq .05$), while 77 percent of the male children and 69 percent of the females were ever hit by their parents ($x^2 \leq .05$).

Why sons are more prone to have violence used on them then daughters is open for debate. Some might argue that boys are more difficult to raise and commit more "punishable offenses" then daughters. Another hypothesis is that our society accepts and often values boys experiencing violence because it serves to "toughen them up". The data from the 1968 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence Survey seem to bear this out in that seven in ten people interviewed believed that it was good for a boy to have a few fist fights while he was growing up (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). Thus, experiencing violence might be considered part of the socialization process for boys and a less important "character " builder for girls (Straus, 1971: 660).

TABLES 4 and 5 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 4

PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE IN PREVIOUS YEAR BY SEX OF CHILD

	PERCENT USED MODE OF VIOLENCE				
	Sons		Daughters		
Threw Something	6.5%	(474)	4.4%	(435)	
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved	38.0%	(476)	25.0%	(436)	**
Slapped or Spanked	61.9%	(475)	55.9%	(435)	
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with Fist	4.0%	(474)	2.5%	(435)	
Hit with Something	16.0%	(475)	11.0%	(436)	
Beat Up	1.9%	(473)	.7%	(434)	
Threatened with Knife or Gun	.2%	(474)	0%	(436)	
Used a Knife or Gun	.2%	(473)	0%	(435)	

^{2}
* x $\leq .05$
^{2}
** x $\leq .01$

TABLE 5

PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE EVER BY SEX OF CHILD

	PERCENT EVER USED MODE OF VIOLENCE				
	Sons		Daughters		
Threw Something	10.8%	(474)	8.0%	(435)	
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved	43.5%	(476)	30.7%	(436)	**
Slapped or Spanked	75.2%	(476)	66.9%	(435)	**
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with Fist	8.2%	(474)	6.2%	(435)	
Hit with Something	21.9%	(475)	17.7%	(436)	
Beat Up	4.7%	(473)	3.2%	(434)	
Threatened with Knife or Gun	2.5%	(474)	2.5%	(436)	
Used a Knife or Gun	2.7%	(473)	2.5%	(435)	

* $\chi^2 \leq .05$

** $\chi^2 \leq .01$

Data on violence in the survey year shows that the only significant difference between boys and girls was whether they were pushed, grabbed, or shoved. The other forms of violence showed no significant differences between the sexes. In the course of growing up, boys are more likely to be pushed, grabbed, shoved, spanked, or slapped.

Violence Towards Children by Age of the Child

The literature on physical punishment and abuse of children presents various hypotheses and findings on the relationship between age and being punished or abused. A number of researchers and clinicians propose that the most dangerous period in a child's life is from three months to three years of age (Kempe, 1962; Fontana, 1973; Galdston, 1965). Bronfenbrenner proposes that the highest rates of child abuse and battering occurs among adolescents (1974). Gil discovered that half of the confirmed cases of child abuse were children over six years of age, while nearly one-fifth of the confirmed reports were children in their teens (1970).

Our survey excluded parent relations with children three years of age or younger since we also studied child to parent violence in the interview. Thus, our data cannot be used to infer the rate of violence used on infants.

During the survey year younger children were most likely to be victims of some form of physical force. Eighty-three percent of the three and four year olds had some mode of force used on them in 1975; 82 percent

of the children five to nine had been hit, 66 percent of pre-teens and early teenage children (10 to 14 years of age) were struck, and 34 percent of the referent children 15 to 17 years old were hit by their parents ($x^2 \leq .01$).

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

It appears that younger children are vulnerable to a wide range of forceful and violent acts. Pre-schoolers and children under 9 years old were more likely to be pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, spanked, kicked, bit, hit with a fist, and hit with an object. The older children seemed more vulnerable to the severest types of violence including being beat up and having a gun or a knife used on them; although, the differences are not statistically significant.

Again, there are a number of reasons why younger children are more frequent victims of parental violence. Parents may perceive difficulties in using reason to punish their younger children. A second reason might be that younger children interfere with their parents' activities more than older children. Our future analyses of the data will focus on the factors associated with young children's susceptability to being struck.

TABLE 6

PARENT TO CHILD VIOLENCE IN PREVIOUS YEAR BY AGE OF CHILD

	PERCENT USED MODE OF VIOLENCE								
	3-4 yrs		5-9 yrs		10-14 yrs		15-17 yrs		
Threw Something	4.4%	(136)	7.4%	(283)	3.7%	(298)	6.3%	(190)	
Pushed, Grabbed, or Shoved	39.0%	(136)	39.2%	(283)	28.7%	(300)	20.9%	(191)	**
Slapped or Spanked	82.2%	(135)	80.6%	(283)	50.7%	(300)	23.7%	(190)	**
Kicked, Bit, or Hit with Fist	7.4%	(136)	2.5%	(281)	2.3%	(299)	3.1%	(191)	*
Hit with Something	20.6%	(136)	21.1%	(284)	10.0%	(299)	4.7%	(190)	**
Beat Up	1.5%	(134)	.7%	(282)	1.3%	(300)	2.1%	(189)	
Threatened with Knife or Gun	0%	(136)	0%	(282)	.3%	(300)	0%	(190)	
Used a Knife or Gun	0%	(136)	0%	(282)	.3%	(298)	0%	(190)	

$^{*}\ x^2 \leq .05$

$^{**}\ x^2 \leq .01$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These data on the incidence of parent to child violence only begin to scratch the surface of this very important topic. Our results indicate that violence towards children involves acts that go well beyond ordinary physical punishment and is an extensive and patterened phenomenon in parent-child relations. In addition, we see that mothers are the most likely users of violence while sons and younger children are the more common victims.

A number of controversial points arise from our presentation. First, disagreement over our nominal and operational definitions of violence may lead some to disagree with our conclusion that violence is widespread in families. If someone views slaps and spankings as acceptable punishment, then they might dispute our statistics as being based on a too broadly constructed definition of violence. Although we believe there are many salient reasons for considering spankings and slaps violent, we would counter this argument by pointing to the statistics for beating up children or using a gun or a knife on a child. If a million or more children had guns or knives used on them in school, we would consider that a problem of epidemic proportions. The fact that these acts occur in the home tends to lessen concern about the impact and consequences. However, the impact and consequences are potentially dramatic, since the child is experiencing violence from those who claim love and affection for him.

A second point which will be raised about our findings is the question of bias and whether our respondents actually told the truth. We have

spent seven years of developing and testing the instruments used in this study. However, we do not know the actual validity of our findings or whether our subjects "told the truth". Our assessment of the biases the problems of studying family violence is that the major bias is likely to be one of underreporting. We doubt that many subjects will report beating up their children or using a gun or a knife on them they did not. Thus, our statistics are probably underestimates of the true level of parent-child violence in the United States. If one considers the possibility that for every subject who admitted using a knife or a gun, that an additional subject used these weapons but did not admit it, then our estimate of risk could be doubled to produce a true estimate of risk of physical violence.

Another issue which will be pursued after examining our data, and an issue which we will pursue in later analyses, is the fact that people actually admitted using severe and dangerous forms of physical violence. Our tentative explanation of this is that many of our subjects did not consider kicking, biting, punching, beating up, shooting, or stabbing their children deviant. In other words, they may have admitted to these acts because they felt they were acceptable or tolerable ways of bringing up children. Thus, it may be that one major factor which porduces the high level of parent-child violence we have found is the normative acceptability of hitting one's children.

Despite the methodological problems, the fact that this is the first

survey of parent-to-child violence based on a true cross-section of American families means that the data presented here are closer to describing the real situation of violence towards children in America than anything available up until now.

FOOTNOTES

*Paper read at the meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Denver, February 25, 1977. This paper is part of a research program on intrafamily violence supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH27557) and the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect/Office of Child Development 90-C-425.

1. The results of this research will be presented in the forthcoming book, VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY, by Murray A. Straus, Richard J. Gelles and Suzanne K. Steinmetz.

2. A complete methodological report will appear in VIOLENCE IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY.

3. Response Analysis Corporation, of Princeton, New Jersey, was contracted to carry out the household survey.

4. The completion rate for the entire sample was 65%. This rate is somewhat lower than we expected despite intensive efforts on the part of the contractor to increase the completion rate through call backs, letters, and monetary incentives. The completion rate varied from a low of 60.0% for metropolitan areas to a high of 72.3% for nonmetropolitan areas. Due to differential response rates by sex and location, the extrapolations and incidence estimates presented in this paper will later be modified using a weighting procedure. Thus, the results we present will be slightly altered in the final presentation of the data.

5. Since the field work began in January, 1976 and since we asked for information concerning the "previous year", the survey year can be thought to be 1975.

6. The term "beating up" was defined for the respondents by its placement in the list of CRT violence items. Specifically it came after the items dealing with kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, and hitting with an object, and before the items dealing with a knife or gun. Thus, it's something more than just a single blow, but the precise meaning of the term undoubtedly varied from respondent to respondent.

7. Again, we do not know exactly what is meant by "using a gun or a knife". In the case of the knife it could mean the parent threw the knife at the child or actually stabbed or attempted to stab the child. The gun could have been fired without the child being wounded. However, the fact is that the parents admitted employing the weapon, not just using it as a threat.

8. We have extrapolated to number of children rather than number of families or parents because our data collection involved the investigation of parental use of violence on a referent child. Since we focused on only one of a possible number of parent-child relations in the family, we do not know the full extent of the respondent's use of violence on all the children, nor do we know the total extent of parent to child violence in the family. In addition, we extrapolated to children in the population because the procedures used to select families and referent children have presumably yielded a random sample of children between 3 and 17 years old who lived with both parents in 1975.

9. We did examine the relationship between age and violence for the duration of the parent-child relationship and found the same general findings--younger children were more likely to be struck. However, this finding probably indicates the fact that parents with older referent children had more trouble recalling violent episodes earlier in the child's life. Thus, we have opted not to attribute any meaning to this finding other than that it probably is a result of recall rather than a true measure of violence ever occurring.

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